



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time | Year C



Jesus is questioned. James Tissot, 1886-1894



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

God of My Life

Only in love can I find you, my God.

In love the gates of my soul spring open,
allowing me to breathe a new air of freedom
and forget my own petty self.

In love my whole being streams forth
out of the rigid confines of narrowness and anxious self-assertion,
which makes me a prisoner of my own poverty and emptiness.
In love all the powers of my soul flow out toward you,
wanting never more to return,
but to lose themselves completely in you,
since by your love you are the inmost center of my heart,
closer to me than I am to myself.

But when I love you,
when I manage to break out of the narrow circle of self
and leave behind the restless agony
of unanswered questions,

when my blinded eyes no longer look merely from afar
and from the outside upon

your unapproachable brightness,
and much more when you yourself,

O Incomprehensible One,
have become through love the inmost center of my life,
then I can bury myself entirely in you, O mysterious God,
and with myself all my questions.

[Karl Rahner, SJ] ¹

Catholic
**Faith, Life
& Creed**
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Breaking Open the
Word worksheets
connect with *Catholic
Faith, Life, & Creed*
Doctrinal Sessions.

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Liturgical Context

- ▶ The Gospels of these weeks are from the section of Luke's Gospel that takes place "on the way to Jerusalem." It is a journey every Christian must take.
- ▶ In these last days of the liturgical cycle the Church focuses on the end of life, end times and the afterlife.
- ▶ The Church groups all such themes under the umbrella of eschatology.
- ▶ Today we remember foundational truths of Christianity.
- ▶ Today's liturgy remembers and makes present the truth that Jesus died for the sins of the world and in so doing opened the gates of heaven for all believers. We recall his resurrection from the dead and the promise of eternal life.
- ▶ Eternal life is not life as we know it in this plane of existence.
- ▶ Eternity is a mystery. Life as we know it will end-we will be changed.
- ▶ We can be confident, however, that we will experience the everlasting, eternal presence of God.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

First Reading: 2 Maccabees 7:1-2; 9-14

- ▶ The early Fathers of the Church had high regard for the books of Maccabees. While the Protestant tradition also held them in high regard, the Catholic Church officially included them in the canon.
- ▶ The books of Maccabees set out to chronicle the history of the people of Israel in covenant relationship with God.
- ▶ The books highlight the way in which the faithfulness of the people and the leadership of Judas were responsible for keeping pagan aggressors at bay.
- ▶ Israel was able to secure its independence as a result of its ultimate trust in God.
- ▶ The second book continued the same theme but was more concerned with religious issues and issues dealing with the Temple.
- ▶ The book highlighted examples of believers who remained steadfast in the midst of suffering, persecution and oppression (a particular focus of today's reading).
- ▶ Another principle theological perspective of the second book was resurrection of the faithful.
- ▶ Presentation of an accurate history of Judaism was not the primary aim of the books. The books of Maccabees are more concerned with articulating a theology of God's intervention in human history. The actual recorded history contained within the books cannot be considered an accurate history.
- ▶ Today's reading relates the story of the mother and her seven sons who endured martyrdom for the sake of their faith.
- ▶ The mother and sons were victims of the tyrannical reign and persecution of

Antiochus Epiphanies.

- ▶ Today's reading upholds belief in resurrection of the dead—a Jewish belief later appropriated by Christianity.
- ▶ The story offers hope to all believers who are persecuted for their faith in God.
- ▶ The theme of resurrection of the just connects the first reading and the Gospel. Jesus challenges the Sadducees' denial of eternal life.
- ▶ The seven brothers died professing their hope in life with God after death.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ Put yourself in the place of the seven children and their mother who were martyred for their faith. Is there any way that you can relate to their story?
- ▶ How is this a relevant word for believers today?
- ▶ While most of us will never be called upon to die for our faith, there are ways that we might be called to suffer for it. When you consider your own life, can you imagine a way in which you might be called to suffer or be persecuted for your faith?
- ▶ What does this reading teach us about our relationship with God?

Second Reading: 2 Thessalonians 2: 16-3:5

- ▶ As the liturgical year comes to a close we find a common theme of these last days running through Paul's letter to the Thessalonians—hope in the afterlife—eternal life and intercessory prayer.
- ▶ Last week Paul responded to fear in the community due to the false letter that was circulating that the end of time was quickly approaching.
- ▶ Paul insisted that they remain steadfast and go about their business of living the Christian life and spreading the Good news.
- ▶ In today's liturgy we hear Paul remind the community that it is Jesus who exhorts them to diligence, who is the source of their hope and who remains with us as they await their eternal joy.
- ▶ Paul reminds believers to be hopeful as they consider their own earthly limitations, the transitory nature of life, and the expectation of Christ's return.
- ▶ Paul insists that the community fervently prays that God's Word continue to go forth to all people.
- ▶ He prays that the Word spread quickly so that all people are given the opportunity to know Christ and embrace the salvation that is theirs.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story or reflection from his or her life. See appendix #2 for an example.

- ▶ In what way, if any, is this letter a relevant letter today?
- ▶ Imagine you are told by a reliable source that the end of the world is coming next week. What would you do? How would you respond? What should be your response?
- ▶ What does our faith tell us our response should be?
- ▶ Since it is doubtful the end of the world is coming next week, how might this reading have implications for us today in our individual lives and in our community’s life?

Gospel: Luke 20:27-38

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?
- ▶ Jesus enters into dialogue with the Sadducees about life after death.
- ▶ Jesus finally arrives at his destination—the culmination of the journey we have all been making with him.
- ▶ The scene is dripping with irony--Jesus teaches his listeners about the resurrection in the very place he will offer up his life.
- ▶ Jesus engages the Sadducees in heated debate.
- ▶ The Sadducees were from the wealthy class who presided over the temple rituals.
- ▶ According to the evangelist Luke’s perspective it was the Sadducees who were responsible for Jesus’ martyrdom.
- ▶ It was they who later persecuted the fledgling Christian church.
- ▶ The Sadducees were the religious fundamentalists of Jesus’ day. They believed in a narrow, conservative interpretation of the Law and doctrine. The Pharisees believed in the Law as well as the oral transmission of God’s word.
- ▶ According to the Sadducees, if it was not written in the Torah, it was false. Thus, they refused to believe in angels or the resurrection of the dead or eternal life since such beliefs were not articulated in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible.

- ▶ Contrasted with the Sadducees were the Pharisees, a less conservative religious party. They were more concerned with the people's spiritual life and thus were far more pastoral than the Sadducees.
- ▶ The Pharisees believed that doctrine was subject to God's ongoing wisdom and revelation and as such considered the works of the prophets and other biblical authors written after the Pentateuch to be God's word revealed to and through human sources.
- ▶ The Pharisees interpreted and applied the Word to real life situations.
- ▶ While Jesus was more sympathetic to the Pharisees and probably considered himself one among them, he did argue with them about some of their interpretations and applications of the Law. He had very little patience for laws and strict codes that placed burdens upon the people.
- ▶ Jesus preached love, not rigid legalism.
- ▶ In today's Gospel the Sadducees challenge the belief in the resurrection of the dead. They used an old law from the Law of Moses to illustrate their point.
- ▶ They raised the issue of the "levirate marriages" (concerning a brother-in-law).
- ▶ The law concerning levirate marriage allowed a woman to marry her dead husband's brother thus assuring that the family (albeit the human race) would continue.
- ▶ Sadducees used this law to illustrate their belief that there was no afterlife.
- ▶ If there was an afterlife who then would be married to whom in that afterlife?
- ▶ Jesus invited them to expand their thinking.
- ▶ The levirate marriage is a law that addresses an issue in this life—not the next life.
- ▶ If the purpose of the levirate law was to perpetuate the human race so it would not die out, such a law does not apply to the afterlife since no one is subject to death in the afterlife anyway.
- ▶ Thus their analogy simply does not apply.
- ▶ We have nothing but our imagination when it comes to the afterlife. We can only think of it in terms of what we know about the life on earth and as such it is like comparing apples to nuclear fusion.
- ▶ Jesus simply invites faith in the living God.
- ▶ Jesus then proceeds to interpret the Torah.
- ▶ Jesus refers to Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush as a proof text for the afterlife.
- ▶ Moses referred to God as the God **of** Abraham and the God **of** Isaac. Since both Abraham and Isaac were dead long before Moses and since they are referred to as though they were still living, it holds that they must still be alive—there has to be an afterlife. Moses did not refer to them in the past tense. He said God "is the God of Abraham—not God was the God of Abraham.
- ▶ God is not the God of the dead—he is the God of the living.
- ▶ Jesus further teaches that life after death is not life as we know it. It is different.
- ▶ Jesus' teaching was in keeping with the Pharisees' belief in the afterlife. They no doubt were pleased with Jesus' interpretation.

- ▶ Luke's catechism in this story is to present a new paradigm regarding what is meant by the term kingdom of God. Jews understood kingdom of God to be a political reality in which the people were subject to a Jewish king and perhaps were in direct or indirect opposition to the ruling authority—the emperor.
- ▶ Luke's agenda is to set forth the post resurrection church's understanding of kingdom of God.
- ▶ Jews believed that prosperity in this life was a sign of God's favor. Thus a long life, children and prosperity was a sign of a righteous life. A future messiah's job was simply to protect the prestige, longevity and prosperity of the righteous deserving ones.
- ▶ Luke's intention was to present a new paradigm.
- ▶ The kingdom Jesus came to establish belonged to God. All things of this earth belong to God who is the creator of all things in the first place.
- ▶ God continues to be in covenant relationship with human beings and to manifest his presence.
- ▶ God created all life—life here on earth and life after death.
- ▶ People who are caught up in the allure and entrapments of this world would be the first to think that *life in God* had to include such things as power, prestige and property—things they knew made them happy in this world.
- ▶ The kingdom of God is not an exalted world for the privileged. "God's new kingdom is not the narrowly conceived world of self-serving, religious sovereignty imagined by the religious leaders of Jesus' time, but rather is a world turned upside down by the radical, paradoxical God who goes about the world searching after sinners to shower with his abundant eternal life." (*Word and Worship Workbook, Year C*, by Mary Birmingham, Paulist Press, 32 OT.)



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ In what way is this a relevant word for us today?
- ▶ What is the primary message of this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this story teach us about God's relationship with us?
- ▶ What is Jesus' point in the Sadducees analogy of the levirate marriage?
- ▶ What are the implications of this analogy for us today?
- ▶ Have you ever given thought to what the afterlife would be like?
- ▶ Have you ever been tempted to believe that this life is all there is? How does that thought make you feel?
- ▶ If Jesus himself came to your door, knocked on it, and told you that you had one year left in this world and then you would be going to heaven, what would you

do with that year?

- ▶ Take a few moments to write the obituary of the holiest person you know.
- ▶ Take a few moments to write your own obituary. What did you learn about yourself?
- ▶ What do you think the Jesus of this Gospel would want us to do with that year?
- ▶ What does this Gospel teach us about our own lives and how we should approach God?
- ▶ Do you think you would find yourself more in line with the Sadducees of Jesus day or the Pharisees? What are the implications for us today when we consider how Jesus approached both religious parties?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97

APPENDIX

#1. I have not as yet been called to be martyred for my faith like the mother and her seven sons. I am, however, called to enter into the cycle of death and resurrection every day. Sometimes I rise to the occasion and other times I fall short. I fall short when I fail to love as God calls me to love.

In ministry we experience the messiness of people's lives. We encounter people who genuinely are searching for the living God and come to us as a result of that search. We encounter others who have not fully awakened to the invitation by God to enter into deeper relationship with him. Such folks sometimes think that the ministry we provide is nothing more than a hoop we demand they jump through. We occasionally meet people who could try the patience of the gentlest soul, yet still we are called to be the face of Christ's compassionate love. There are days when it is a challenge to keep going and keep our head above water. I would assume that it is at such times that I am called to die and rise again for those people Christ puts in my path. It is at such times that I am called to lay down my life for God's people and love when it is difficult to love.

I may not be asked to die for my faith, but I certainly am called to lay down my love for it.

#2. God is merciful and as such I believe he has much more work to do in our very broken world before he is ready to return and take us all home. While that is the eschatological hope we all share, chances are very good that I will die before Jesus comes again. Thus, the question becomes: how might I respond to the apocalyptic fervor that is present in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians?

While I do not think Jesus' return is immanent, I am called to live my life as though it is. For all I know I could be called home tomorrow. In that case Jesus' return is all too real for me. The lesson for all of us is to be vigilant at all times.

Several years ago people were racing to Tampa, Florida to see a image of Jesus that had "appeared" on the side of a bank building. Supposedly the image appeared as a result of some weather and chemical phenomenon. My question then was: "What do you seek on that bank wall that you do not experience within your own heart?" Too much attention on such things or worrying about the day or the hour of the Lord's return is a distraction from the business of covenant relationship with God. While waiting for Jesus' return I have no further to look than the temple of my own spirit to experience his presence.

#3. A famous well-respected lie detector firm insists that whenever they ask the question: "Do you believe in God?" When the person answers, "No, I am an atheist," it comes up 100% of the time as a lie. We are made with an intrinsic knowledge and hunger for God. Thus, could we also be made with an inborn awareness of the afterlife? I think it is a basic human need to believe that there is more to this existence than the few short years we spend here.

I admittedly am sometimes tempted to ask myself if this is all there is. Faith shouts my answer, “Of course there is more; there is life with God in eternity.” When I consider the plight of my suffering child and the untold millions of people who suffer in this world, belief in a just God only makes sense if there is hope for eternal joy and life with the living Christ.

Such hope invites me to wait for that future joy and to grow in intimacy with the Christ who lives within me and in each person with whom I have contact. It is my responsibility to share the Good News of eternal life and to be the compassionate hands and feet of Christ and relieve suffering wherever it exists.

A friend recently shared how she ministered to a woman in our social concerns office. It was a day like any other day. She no sooner opened the door and a young woman was waiting to be helped. The woman was in tears and ashamed that she had a need that required assistance. She had been in a car accident and was injured. She then lost her job and needed help.

The young woman broke down in tears. She shared how she was the driver of the car in which an eighteen year old boy from our parish was recently killed. It was an accident—no one was at fault. This poor woman was grief stricken and could not get the young boy out of her mind and her heart.

The amazing part of this story is that my friend had lost a child in a similar accident many years before. While no one was at fault in that accident, she always wondered: did the driver of that car grieve? Did the driver of that car understand the precious gift of life she had been given as a result of being spared the same fate as her son? Standing before her was the answer to those questions and her own nagging grief.

The young woman told my friend that there is not a night before she drifts into sleep in which the last face she sees is the young boy who was killed. She prays for him and his family. She asks God to relieve their grief and their sorrow. She wonders if she will ever get over the tragic sense of loss of that fateful day.

Both women held each other in embrace, connected by stories of similar gut wrenching, senseless deaths. The two of them were able to tearfully share their hope in the resurrection. It was a moment of healing for both women.

Our hope in the afterlife is the only thing that makes sense out of the senseless things of this life. I am grateful to be a Christian.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Heaven, Hell and Purgatory
Salvation
Creed
Marriage
Kingdom of God

Jesus Christ
Sacrament of Reconciliation
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

ESCHATOLOGY, END TIMES, HEAVEN, HELL AND PURGATORY

Today's second reading and Gospel look to that future hope we all share in the afterlife. We are to be prepared for that day whether it comes tomorrow or in the future. It is thus most appropriate as the Church year begins its slow winding down that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about ESCHATOLOGY, END TIMES, HEAVEN, and HELL AND PURGATORY.

SALVATION

Today's liturgy is a testament to God's saving power and salvation that ensures life with God in eternity. The readings today invite preparedness and watchfulness for the Lord's coming and the salvation he brings. We are thus invited into intimate relationship with the God who continues his ongoing work of salvation in the world. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about SALVATION.

CREED

Today's liturgy affirms our belief in Christ's salvific resurrection from the dead, and our own overall belief in the afterlife. Such beliefs are foundational Christian truths and as such are proclaimed in the Creed we profess every Sunday in the Eucharistic Liturgy. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the CREED.

SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE

Jesus' conversation with the Sadducees about the levirate marriage law regarding who would be married to whom in the afterlife (an attempt by the Sadducees to disprove the afterlife), was not a conversation about marriage. It was a conversation about the afterlife. However, it does prompt questions about marriage in general and thus would be an appropriate occasion to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE.

KINGDOM OF GOD

Luke's intention in today's Gospel is to illustrate the difference between the Jewish understanding of kingdom of God and the early Church's interpretation of that concept. Jesus illustrated what it means to live in the kingdom he came to establish. He invites deep conversion of heart. He welcomes the sinner and invites the outcast. Today's liturgy is a reminder that we are all called to live in his kingdom—a kingdom now as we await the kingdom yet to come. It is thus most fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the KINGDOM OF GOD.

JESUS CHRIST

Jesus is the long awaited messiah—the messiah of the new kingdom he came to establish—not a political kingdom rooted in power, possessions and prestige, but one rooted in life with God. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on that Messiah who promises eternal life and died for us to ensure it. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on JESUS CHRIST.

SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

One way we are constantly vigilant and ready for Christ's return is to be conscious of our need for God's grace and mercy. One fountain of that grace and mercy is experienced in the sacrament of reconciliation. It is thus appropriate to focus our attention today on the SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION.

EUCCHARIST SERIES:

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part ____ of the Eucharistic Series.